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### **The Old, the Ugly and the Queer: thinking old age in relation to queer theory**

#### Abstract

*This article seeks to use queer theory as a social theory and a critical challenge to normalcy all together to theorise old age in gender studies. Additionally the article discusses some implications of bringing old age into queer theory, where the able body, older person's sexualities in relation to heteronormativity, to mention a few things, are central for future queer theory. The red thread of the article is how the anti-social turn in queer theory and embracing shame may be used to critique the prevailing discourses of old age as either "successful" where the older person should be active and independent or old age as decline and decay. Queer theoretical notions such as failure and the abject are used to theorise old age and ageing bodies, but the article also discusses how some flexible bodies can overcome failures given class, sexuality, ablebodiedness and race etc. To perform in the Butlerian sense an intelligible and desired self is dependent both on gender, sexuality and age and this is in effect relying on certain modes of temporality. Queer temporality may thus challenge what is considered normal and good ageing but also reveal the taken for grantedness of normative time. The article concludes that by thinking queer theory and old age together a resurrection of knowledges is made possible, outside the good, successful and respectable old age.*

Keywords: old age, queer theory, ageing, abject, failure, queer temporality, performativity, positive ageing, successful ageing

#### **Introduction**

Rather than seeing queer theory as just a perspective of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people Michael Warner does in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer planet: Queer Politics and Social theory* (1994) argue for queer theory as a social theory with more far-reaching consequences than simply the inclusion of GLBT into the already existing social theories. With this and Judith Butler's proposition in mind that queer should be "a site of collective

contestations, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (Butler 1993, 223 and 228) this article is an attempt to reflect on how some key elements in queer theory may be interesting for further theorising and researching old age and ageing within the context of gender studies. The article moreover shows how queer theory can be further developed and rethought from the perspective of old age. A central argument of the article is how old age is shaped by two seemingly contradictory discourses, one positive discourse on ageing well and successful ageing and one on ageing as decline, both which spring from mid-life ageism. In an attempt to critique and challenge this the article discusses how queer theory’s turn to the anti-social and anti-identity<sup>1</sup> may be useful for thinking of old age as abject and imbued with negativity, and thus open to subversion and change. Another key argument is how gender performativity is not only linked to sexuality but also to age, and performing age is in turn connected to certain modes of heteronormative temporalities.

Though little discussed within gender studies and queer theory, age holds great potential for how to rethink sexualities, gender and embodiment. As Judith Kegan Gardiner proposes “age categories provide useful analogies for nonpolarized ways of conceptualizing gender”(Gardiner 2002, 91) and the non-dichotomous and fluid understanding of age is also in line with how queer theorists have tried to conceptualise sexualities. Sexuality as well as age is not static but changes over the life course, which could be seen as a central claim of queer theory. There are also parallels between the performative character of both age, gender and sexuality, where performing an aged and gendered/sexual self in coherent ways is crucial for being culturally intelligible. (cfr. Butler 1990). The reason for turning to old age and ageing in relation to queer theory is, however, above all a way to critically inquire into normativities and power. Age seems by many as utterly taken for granted; ageing is regarded as a process beyond the social. Still the discourses surrounding ageing shape bodies and subjectivities in an endless reiteration. Just as Wittig proposes that heterosexuality always goes unmarked so does mid-age (Wittig 1992). In focusing old age there is a risk of further making only old age into age; however I would argue that discussing and deconstructing old age may also be a means to critique ageism and the taken for

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to the anti-social I am referring to the anti-assimilationist and anti-modernist strand in queer theory which will also be termed embracing shame or turn to negativity. With anti-identity I am intending the rejection of identity politics which is central to queer theory (Jagose 1996).

granted norms around mid-life. A turn to age and ageing may moreover be useful for queer theory, looking at the changes, shapes and fluidity of bodies and desires. By taking the outset in old age, intersecting normativities of as well gender and sexuality as the able body come under scrutiny.<sup>2</sup>

To use the concept of old age is however not unproblematic, and within social gerontology there has been a turn to the notion of later life when discussing old age and ageing (for some discussion see Bytheway 1989). In this article, which is primarily a theoretical discussion, I have however chosen to discuss around the concept of old age rather than later life. My concern is primarily representational discourses rather than subjective, everyday and lived experiences of later life, and the notion of old age is regarded as a discourse into which individuals are interpellated or hailed. Interpellation coming from Louis Althusser (1971 [1970]) has in gender studies been employed by Judith Butler (1990) to discuss how individuals become viable as subjects through a discursive matrix of gender and heterosexuality. When discussing old age here I am regarding it as a discourse from which we become intelligible as subjects. To understand us as all being interpellated into age does not mean to deny real life experiences of old age, the social and physical changes throughout the life course. That growing old is an indisputable fact does not however mean that there is a unitary and given meaning to old age, as a discourse old age is aligned with expectations and assumptions around all aspects of social life as well as around the body. With the risk of reinforcing this very discourse that I seek to critique I find it necessary to centre my argument around old age, because it operates in society and is central for how we come to being as subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> It is however necessary to note the differences between queer and old age in order not to make false analogies. As Queer theorist and literary scholar Heather Love (2001) remarks queer theory's turn to shame and negativity is done in reaction to the affirmative history attempted by many Gay and Lesbian scholars. Love discusses how queer must develop a "politics of the past" that accounts for the stigma, shame and suffering which lies deeply embedded in the genealogy of queer existence. (Love 2001:496) Queer has sediments of negativity which cannot be overlooked. This history of shame is also relevant when race is concerned, and with both queer and black the very claiming of the shaming words "queer" and "nigger" holds a significant role. The analogies of queer and disability are also rather salient. Not only do both disability and homosexuality share a pathologised past, both are also in times of postmodernity and neo-liberalism connected to issues of visibility and tolerance. (McRuer 2006) Age is for one thing different in how many people will experience being as well as young also mid-aged and old. Age can in other words not be seen as ontologically equivalent to race and gender/sexuality and the turn to queer theory when studying age must take this into concern.

### **Queer negativity and positive successful ageing: introducing some central concepts**

Important to Queer theory has been its vehement critique of identity politics from around which much LGBT-studies have been centred. This critique seems plausible to apply also to studies of old age and later life. Research on old age seems in the vein of identity politics preoccupied with making visible the category of older (crf. Thompson 1994, Fleming 1999, Woodward 1999). This article however tries to critically deconstruct claims for visibility, recognition and assimilation of older people and look at how insights from queer theory may offer a different thinking of old age. In this article I am using the concept of “embracing shame” as discussed by Bond Stockton (2006) as a concept developed out of queer theory and activism’s anti-assimilationist approach. There is no inherent meaning in the concept, no straightforward way in how this is done. Rather embracing shame is a theoretical stand that seeks to deploy feelings of shame, negativity and disgust linked to queer identities and lives, but in my case also saliently linked to old age.

In the article the concept of “embracing shame” in relation to old age (and other intersecting categories such as disability and gender) is contrasted to discourses of “positive ageing” or “successful ageing”. To give a brief background: the concept of successful ageing holds a central and important position in social gerontology (in European context referred to as positive ageing or ageing well) and has won widespread recognition most notably since the Gerontological Society of America made it a theme of their 1986 annual meeting (Torres & Hammarström 2006). While much contested and critiqued successful ageing nevertheless captures a very important strand in social gerontology, to increase people’s potential to age well.

Central to the debates around successful ageing are Rowe & Kahn with their seminal work “Human aging: usual and successful” (1987). To Rowe & Kahn successful ageing is equated with low risks of disease, physical functioning and active engagement with society

(Rowe & Kahn 1997). Other things that have been associated with successful ageing within social gerontological debate are activity, generativity, autonomy, capacity for self care and reaching one's potential (Torres 2001). Rowe and Kahn's definition of successful ageing has met strong critiques deeming it too narrow (Torres 2001) and the concept has also met critiques for its universalistic stance with a strong western template (Torres 2001, 2003, and Hammarström 2006). In relation to class Featherstone & Wernick (1995) have pointed to the middle class bias of the understandings of successful ageing, where only those who can partake in consumerist practices to lessening the effects of bodily decline can become successful. There has in the 1990's been a shift in the social gerontological debates of successful ageing from an emphasis on "what" successful ageing may imply to "how" successful ageing can be achieved, various strategies for optimising potentials for ageing well (Baltes & Baltes 1990). There has in addition been a turn to discussing the concept in terms of how older people themselves understand "successful ageing" (Torres & Hammarström 2006).

Despite the contestations and critiques of the concept and the shift away from the more normative definitions of what ageing well may imply the concept has seeped into other discursive arenas outside the social gerontological field. As Katz notes the idea of ageing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as positive is widespread, and grey political activists as well as community workers and policy makers now embrace positive ageing (Katz 2001/2002). The reason for going into the debates of successful ageing is to get a background and understanding of the notions of positive and successful ageing and what has been associated with the term. The discourses I am referring to in this article are not confined to the social gerontological field but encompass massmedia, policy making and more. From hereon I primarily using the notions of positive discourse or discourses of positive ageing for rhetorical reasons to juxtapose to the queer theoretical embracing of negativity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the word successful in successful ageing has been critiqued for its American pedigree and for its implication that ageing is a contest which you may actually fail. Using positive ageing is thus also a way of encompassing a broader and non-american context. It is in general worth considering the context from which I am writing, which is a western but more specifically a Scandinavian context. Scandinavian scholars have in recent years discussed the specific Anglo-American origins of a great deal of queer theory. Questions have been raised to what extent the specific history and culture of the Scandinavian countries influence the way we can use queer theory. I think this is well worth keeping in mind, but it is however not something I intend to discuss further. When thinking of old age it is also noteworthy that Scandinavia has been shaped by Social-democrat welfare models throughout the

The article concurs with the critical voices labeling positive ageing possible only for some and a discourse built on a oxymoronic notion, where ageing well is equated with resisting ageing (Torres & Hammarström 2006). I start out by further contextualizing old age in neo-liberal consumerism society and then propose thinking through the abject to deconstruct and critique discourses of positive ageing. Moving on with the queer theoretical arsenal I discuss failure and how failed performativity can be a way of thinking of old age. I am subsequently discussing heteronormativity in relation to old age before finally suggesting that discourses of positive ageing may be deconstructed through queer temporalities.<sup>4</sup>

### **Embracing shame: old age and the abject**

The contemporary shift to positive notions of old age has not entailed an abolition of ageist discourses, and old age as decline and decay have continued to co-exist alongside the positive discourses of old age (Torres & Hammarström 2006, Katz 2001/2002, Calasanti & King 2005). There is a very complex and at times contradictory understanding of old age and ageing bodies which is at stake in late modernity shaped at the nexus of ageist discourse, neo-liberal and consumerist culture and a progressivist agenda. While social gerontologists have raised caveats against the positive discourses, arguing that who may age positively, successfully and well is dependent on class, ability, race and ethnicity the turn to queer theoretical notions of “embracing shame” and the abject may offer further ways to critique and rethink positive discourses of old age.

Ageing and ageing bodies today are constructed in relation to neo-liberalism, consumer culture and progressivist thought (Twigg 2000, Faircloth 2003, Featherstone & Hepworth 1991).

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20<sup>th</sup> century. Influence of neo-liberalism has been somewhat less than in comparison with the U.S., though this is rapidly changing with the restructuring of the welfare state. State financed health and care services are however available to all older citizens to a greater extent than in the US. Noting the context is also important for understanding how nation state and whiteness is constructed in older people’s lives.

<sup>4</sup> The inspiration for this article springs from the work with my dissertation on older men and experiences of embodiment and sexuality in the lives of older men. Though this article does not specifically focus on masculinity and men many of the examples I draw upon come from studies on older men. In order to avoid reinforcing “an absent presence” of men and men’s bodies I am urging the readers to keep this in mind. My intent is to highlight the invisibility of the hegemony, heterosexual men, and what the role of old age is in this normative position.

Neo-liberalism has co-opted the social gerontological “ageing well” (Gross & Blundo 2005) and successful ageing, where the older person should take responsibility over one’s ageing and be active in shaping one’s life in retirement which are fitting with neo-liberal imperatives of productivity and generativity (Laliberté Rudman 2006 ). Discourses on sexuality in later life are in addition influenced by a consumerist version of ageing well through the advent of Viagra where “sex for life” is promoted (Potts et. Al 2006). Sexual activity should continue as one age as a part of “ageing well” and doing successful ageing. For men this involves being sexually active and virile, to continuously be able perform an intelligible masculine sexuality where erection and ability to penetrate are essential features (Marshall & Katz 2002, Gross & Blundo 2005). Gregory Gross & Robert Blundo argue that the medicalisation of male sexuality with the introduction of Viagra has been paralleled by a commodification and commercialisation, where male sexuality has been “deprivatized” (Gross & Blundo 2005). Consumer culture has all over had an indisputable impact on the shaping of ageing bodies in late modernity. Material goods and continuous working on the body are required in a culture where there is a preoccupation with perfection and where the body becomes a vehicle for pleasure (Twigg 2000). Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner (1991) purport in their influential theorising on bodies in late modernity that the ascetic work on the body is now not rewarded spiritually but materially through a marketable self. To resist ageing and to work on the body in order to diminish signs of ageing thus becomes a crucial part of how ageing is handled in a neo-liberal consumer culture. Ageing is regarded as a form of moral laxity, (Featherstone 1991) something which consequently has caused a cultural paranoia; “ an endemic fear of ageing”. (Gulette 1998) This fear of ageing is not solely a concern of the old but a disquiet also among youth and permeates our culture as a whole (Schwaiger 2006).

Parallel to this positive ageing discourse and indeed intermeshed in this is a discourse that signifies ageing with decline and decay, in which old age is linked to passivity and frailty, and the ageing body is connoted with negativity. (Schwaiger 2006, Laliberté Rudman 2006, Twigg 2000). The discourses of neo-liberalism, consumerism and progressivism discussed above promote resistance to this passivity and decline through active choices, working on the body etcetera. These positive discourses of ageing are however to a great extent dissonant with lived

experiences. As Gross & Blundo argue the “ageing well” discourse being accompanied by youthful active bodies is a distorted picture of men’s experiences of ageing where ill health often is a reality, which is also true to older women’s lives (Gross & Blundo 2005). Julia Twigg also notes that the mundane and everyday experiences are little researched in social gerontology and in a vein of progressivism permeating social policy the negativities of the body are often effaced (Twigg 2000).

The shift to positive ageing did not wipe out these connotations of ageing and decline, rather there is a new package to a prevailing ageism. As Toni Calasanti and Neil King argue successful ageing implies “not aging and not being old because our constructions of old age contain no positive content” (Calasanti & King 2005, 7). Stephen Katz is in the same vein pointing to the role of consumerism in this stating: “ideals of positive aging and anti-ageism have come to be used to promote a wide-spread anti-aging culture, one that translates their radical appeal into commercial capital” (Katz 2001/2002, 27). There is seemingly a resemblance between the assimilationist discourses on homosexuality and on old age, where being old does not have to be a negative thing as long as you live life like you used to live it. (The assimilations version in relation to homosexuality would be we tolerate that you are gay as long as you live a respectable coupled life like us the heterosexuals). The shift to the term “senior” instead of “old” or “elderly” when discussing older people represent this attempt to reverse connotations of old age as decline and negative. Another example is the formation of the Swedish National Association “To age is to grow”<sup>5</sup>. The name of the association tries to signify old age not as decline but as a positive phase and a time to increase one’s potential, and the aim was to mould opinions that the “older can”. However taking part in and continuously constructing a positive discourse on ageing like in this case do not necessarily diminish the effects of ageist discourses of ageing as decline. Rather as Denise Laliberté Rudman shows in her analysis of discourses on the successful retiree in Canadian newspapers, the shaping of some older persons as successful is done in relation to those who fail to become autonomous, responsible and independent retirees (Laliberte Rudman 2006). Some older persons are in other words continuously constructed as frail, victims and problematic. And as Calasanti & King (2005) argue, class influences who is

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<sup>5</sup> “Att åldras är att växa” was a joint project between Swedish NGOs formed in the 1990’s.



shaped as successful and who is not, and I would add that ability, sexuality and race are also influencing who can age successfully. Thus the queer theoretical rejection of positive ageing discourses as a an emerging site for rethinking age seem interesting and fruitful; rather than trying to assimilate to “positive” norms of mid-life which are unattainable to many seeing the possibilities of negativity.

The discourses of positive ageing which were introduced by Rowe & Kahn (1987, 1997) and others to some extent were meant to reverse the connotations of ageing with decay and decline (and as Torres 2006, notes had some positive effects on research on ageing in how it separated ageing from disease) can nevertheless be regarded as problematic in how they are creating norms of activity and active choice attainable only for some older, but also in how they efface “negativities” most notably of ageing bodies. However, ailments and disabilities as well as inability to control one’s bowels and urine leakages are realities for many people in old age. Hence, I will open up for a discussion of the old body as abject and how queer theory proposes the abject as a site for subversion. The abject has in feminist theory been much related to femininity. Drawing on Freud and the development of shame feminist theorist have argued that women’s inability to control their bodily fluids and leakages have rendered them abject and consequently subordinate (Kristeva 1982, Grosz 1994).<sup>6</sup> But this is also translatable to older people’s bodies which frequently in high old age suffer from incontinence. The abjection of the ageing body is also caused by its closeness to death and decay. To Kristeva the abject is the non-wanted, what the body falls away from, constituting pollution or dirt and the abjection in the form of bodily waste is at its extreme the horror of the corpse (Kristeva 1982). Older persons and bodies of old age as linked to death and dying could therefore in many instances be in the furthest position of the abject. However what is interesting is how the combination of old age and gender may challenge the feminist theorist understanding of only femininity as abject. Differences in old age may diminish and ageing may make older persons more androgynous (Silver 2003). Accordingly the abject leakages as usually connected to femininity and female subordination may be related to older men and their bodies. Older men’s bodies could be seen as abject and queered through leakages and failures in old age.

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<sup>6</sup> To Sigmund Freud, the child’s learning to control his/her bowels generates the development of feelings of embarrassment, shame and disgust and in relation to gender (Grosz 1994).



The concept of abject and abjection has played a significant role for the development of queer theory. Schwaiger writes on abjection in relation to gender:

Abjection here is a response to an ambiguous form of signification, a signification that does not refer to culturally accepted gender norms, but that through its very ambiguity of performance throws these culturally cherished norms into question. Abjection is dangerous because it is always ambiguous, and is therefore seen as (merely) transitional.” (Schwaiger 2006:28)

The ambiguity and fluidity and the consequent possibilities of change and subversion is possibly what has made abject such a pivotal notion in queer theory. Judith Butler’s usage of abject has proven highly useful for explaining the instability of the heterosexual matrix and how the abject in this case the homosexual is required as a signifier of the heterosexual, yet always threatening (Butler 1990, 1993). In abjection there is not only exclusion but abjection also serves as a challenge: “what disturbs identity, system, order” (Bond Stockton 2006:13). To Butler, the abject serves the very promise of subversion in how it despite its impossibility and unintelligibility continues to exist; the abject is the disruption to the ongoing reiteration of heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 1993). The abject has in addition been linked to the queer theoretical notion of debasement. “‘Abject’ is ‘of the lowest degree, ‘lacking in self-respect; degraded’. It’s synonym is ‘base’” (Bond-Stockton 2006:12). What perhaps has become apparent in the discussion of the<sup>7</sup> abject is how it also is very linked to corporeality. The links to shame, embarrassment and disgust so inherent in abjection are very much connected to bodily matters, with the rectum as in the classic queer theoretical work “Is the rectum a grave?” by Leo Bersani (1987) being the most obvious corporeal connotation.

Following my argument above, that old age and ageing is still connoted with negativity and degradation I would suggest that the embracement of shame and the turn to negativity has a lot to offer the theorising of old age. The neo-liberal discourses on how to become a successful, independent and autonomous retiree has evident parallels to an assimilationist and neo-liberal strand acknowledging gay and lesbian existences as long as they adhere to heteronormative

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<sup>7</sup> Not abject is an example of debasement, a notion that plays a significant role in queer theory.

ideals of non-promiscuity, coupledness etc. The main reason why “embracing shame” and employing the concept of abject in relation to older people is that ageism cannot be challenged with positive discourses of successful ageing. What may then “embracing of shame” involve in relation to old age? It seems as if the body is at the very centre of this. Urine and faeces incontinence, disabilities, erectile dysfunction are some of the bodily matters that may cause shame and stigma in older persons. But also mental abilities such as forgetfulness or senile dementia are stigmatising older persons, leading to negative stereotyping. In the next section I discuss the notion of failure as a way to embrace negativity and theorise old age, both in terms of failing to do one’s age properly but also in terms of failing bodies.

### **Performativity and failure: old age and the body**

To further employ queer theory towards thinking of old age outside positive ageing this section will discuss performativity and failure in relation to gender and age. Just as gender is crucial for being intelligible within the realm of the social so is age. The possibility to become a subject is dependent on one’s ability to perform gender, but also to some extent age. Schwaiger inspired by Butler’s theories on performativity suggests: “bodies that do not (or cannot) normatively perform their age weaken the category of age by the ambiguity inherent in their performance” (Schwaiger 2006:26f). And Schwaiger argues that the ageist norms which make the body in old age viable can be challenged in performative acts; “ageist perceptions of older people *can* be changed over time by the ways in which people perform age” (Ibid. 2006:31).

The role of failure holds a very significant position in queer theory and critiques of heteronormativity. Essentially heterosexuality needs to be continuously reiterated but this reiteration is always under threat of disruption. Failing to do proper man or woman, which is intrinsically linked to heterosexuality, leads to abjection. But as I have noted earlier on abjection, this very failure is also a challenge and opens up possibilities for change. There is a very complex relation between failures in relation to gender and failures in relation to age. On the one hand, failing to perform one’s age could imply a failure to perform an intelligible and culturally

acceptable gender. On the other hand, rejecting the interpellation of age may be a way to adhere to hegemonic gender constructions, like maintained virility of men. It is important here to see that failures have essentially different meanings in the lives and ageing of men and women.

Older women have received some attention from a gendered perspective, where often the demands on older women to handle their appearance in relation to youthful beauty ideals are discussed (Woodward 1999, Krekula 2006, Hurd 2001, Paulson&Willig 2008). Where this research is much focused on the empirical and everyday lived experience the representational aspects of older women and the theoretical implications of older women's bodies are less discussed. The old, sagging, leaky, female body could in many instances be regarded as the very quintessence of the abject. Mary Russo's (1994) discussions of the grotesque are very interlinked with the abject and the old woman's excessive and unbounded corporality could be regarded as one form of the female grotesque. Turning to queer studies, older women's sexuality and normativity are little discussed. I would argue that older women as abject and failed gender performances of older women are very much linked to sexuality and the body. I am particularly interested in heterosexual older women who seemingly comply with imperatives of heteronormativity but still fail to perform a desired (and intelligible) feminine self. One example is the older woman who in wearing for example short skirts, leopard skin tights, excessive jewellery and make up disrupts codes of dress for older women. As Twigg notes older people's dress are framed within a moral climate and dress becomes a way to police and regulate older women's bodies in relation to sexuality (Twigg 2007, 295). Older women dressing in overtly sexual manners risk being labeled and castigated not only as "an old slag" but also as "mutton dressed as lamb" (Ibid.296, Fairhurst 1998). This expression conveys how heterosexual displays in older women can be deemed failures, given their inability/unwillingness to perform their age. Being heterosexual and feminine in the right way accordingly involves adjusting to age norms. Adjusting to one's age is also about adjusting to heteronormative modes of temporality, and those who can or do not are failures in relation to age and gender performativity.

Failures of the ageing male is much less evident than failures of ageing females, with strong connotations with the abject. Failure is however just as salient for theorising the role of the older man, for whom the risk of being stigmatized for not acting one's age however is less

linked to sexual propriety and appearance than for women. Rather older men's failures are connected to the failing body, where erectile dysfunction or the failed erection is of central importance. The emphasis on the erect penis being able to penetrate, holds a very central place in the heterosexual matrix. The problem to get and hold an erection has been renamed from impotence to erectile dysfunction and has changed from being perceived as a psychological matter to a medical issue (Marshall & Katz 2002). The advent of Viagra and other similar medication have added to a pathologising of erectile problems and late modern discourses proclaim that the prevalence of impotence among men is high and even more widespread among older men. This pathologisation of erectile dysfunction in late modernity can be understood from a Foucauldian perspective as a disciplining and regulatory function of male heterosexuality and reinforcement of normalcy of the erect penis.

Failure becomes a linking concept not only between gender, sexuality and old age but also with the able/disabled body. Failures of the body in old age can be understood in relation to McRuer's "Crip theory". "Crip theory" as a radically social constructivist social theory suggests links between heterosexuality and ability, as normativities that both have to be constantly reiterated. The genealogical roots of heteronormativity can be traced to Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) and McRuer argues that we may also talk of "compulsory able-bodiedness". Able-bodiedness is contingent on disability just as heterosexuality depends on homosexuality. The invisibility or "non-identity" of heterosexuality, highlighted by Monique Wittig, (1992) is consequently just as salient for able-bodiedness. To be able-bodied is simply to be, in the sense that it is an invisible norm and naturalised. The doing of the able-body is however under constant threat of failure, just as the making of heterosexuality is always under the risk of failure (McRuer 2006). Crip theory suggests that the able body is never fully attainable and bringing in an age perspective to this shows further how our bodies always at some point risk failing us. The changes of the body in old age pose a vital threat to the maintenance and achievement of the able-body and denial of disruptions of the body. In one way or another all bodies tend to fail us, illnesses and disabilities of old age being blatant proof of this. Looking more closely at older men, it is possible to theorise erectile dysfunctions as failed



erection and consequently a way to deconstruct male heterosexuality as well as male able-bodiedness.

Old age must, however, be understood in all its complexity where the range spans not only over many generations but also over variety of race and class positions as well as concerning different abilities, sexualities and genders. Feminist and queer scholars have contended that those who cannot comply with norms on gender and sexuality and cannot show coherence between gender and sexuality are ultimate failures (cfr. Love 2001). It is therefore clear that in old age there are some people who are considered failures in several and different respects whereas for others the effects of failing bodies in old age are minor and repairable. It is in other words impossible to juxtapose the failures of an old transsexual to an old heterosexual man and one therefore needs concepts to explain what enables some older persons to overcome failure. McRuer's crip theory draws on Emily Martin's notion of "flexible bodies" (McRuer 2006:16) which could be a way of understanding how failures may be repaired for some. The context of the flexible bodies are postmodernity, neo-liberalism and late capitalism and relating to my earlier discussion of positive discourses on successful retirees emerging in a neo-liberal context it is plausible to see "the successful" as non-failed but flexible. The Swedish discourses on the successful retiree in many ways coincide with white able-bodiedness, heterosexual masculinity and a bourgeoisie class position and the successful retiree seemingly hold a flexible body in how he manages to "perform wholeness through each recurring crisis" (McRuer 2006, 17). Flexible bodies in old age manage to come out as "successful retirees" after disruptions such as retirement but also after bodily failures such as illness. Viagra as a product of postmodernity and late capitalism here occur as a tool to shape these flexible bodies, giving stamina and firmness to the failing floppy penises and making possible repetition of able-bodiedness and desired heterosexuality in old age.

From this it is apparent that old age may not necessarily marginalise men, rather intersections of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness together with whiteness and a middle class position or higher in older men may render them flexible bodies and consequently resist failure (relatively). Though heterosexuality plays a significant role in the flexibility of the body, what is interesting is how heteronormativity and desired heterosexuality is regulated in relation to age.



As I discussed earlier in relation to old women as “grotesque” and the failed impotent older man, performing a sexual self in desirable and culturally intelligible ways is very much about performing a particular aged self. Taking the outset from those failures may then be an intersectional way of thinking old age and the various power asymmetries it may involve.

### **Heteronormativity, desirability and the old**

As discussed above the complexity and various intersections of power at stake in relation to old age must be taken into account when thinking queer theory in relation to old age. When sexualities of older persons are discussed the picture is very dual. On the one hand older people are regarded as asexual, sexual desires are thought to diminish as one ages (Silver 2003). On the other hand, within the late modern discourses on how to “age well” a continued (hetero)sexual activity in later life is stressed. (Gross & Blundo 2005) Given how heteronormativity as a social structure, a social contract, regulates and influences all spheres of society it also informs how sexualities of older persons are perceived and labelled normal or deviant (Wittig 1992, Warner 1994). As Warner notes: “ ‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (Warner 1994:xxvi). Turning to the work of Gayle Rubin, who has played a central role for the development of queer theory not least in how she has redirected the focus from the binary of homosexual/heterosexual, understanding heteronormativity involves how desires and sexualities are differently hierarchised and rendered desired/undesired (Rubin 1984). Intimacy, love and coupledness are some very pivotal aspects of heteronormativity. Regulations against inter-racial and inter-generational sexual relations are other important strands. Age as a social category consequently plays an important role in how heteronormativity functions.

Not least is the dual picture evident when it comes to older men’s sexuality. The stigma of impotence is one aspect that has been highlighted in research on masculinity, ageing and sexuality (Marshall & Katz 2002, Potts et al. 2006, Gross & Blundo 2005 Calasanti & King 2005). Sexual (coital) activity in older men is hence seen as desirable. The sexual desirability of heterosexual men is not only visible in Viagra-discourses proclaiming successful ageing through



maintained erection but also in how heterosexual men are regarded as sexually desirable for significantly younger women. Older men's maturity seemingly renders them a sexual social capital. The actor Sean Connery embodies this discourse of the older mature heterosexual man as sexually desirable. The sexual desirability of Connery is captured in the catch phrase of a whiskey commercial Connery is starring in, "Some age, others mature".<sup>8</sup> In the commercial Connery teaches his young (Bond) self to enjoy whiskey and meanwhile a beautiful young woman waits outside the door eager to come in. The innuendo of the commercial is very clear: Connery remains sexually desirable to the younger woman given his maturity. Consequently old age doesn't necessarily diminish sexual attractiveness in older men as they are related to the discourse of ageing as maturing.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to these representations and discourses on older heterosexual men's sexuality is the cultural representation of the "dirty old man" (Calasanti & King 2005). This discourse talks of an insatiable male sexuality that will not be stemmed to what is appropriate for an older man. How this negative stereotyping can exist alongside the representation of older men as sexually desirable I suggest can be understood in relation to heteronormativity and its intersections with age and masculinity. Older men's and women's sexual activities that take place within a heterosexual monogamous relationship are regarded as healthy and increasing one's well-being in later life. The label "dirty" old man however conveys something of the non-wanted, as we've come to understand dirt from Mary Douglas much cited *Purity and danger* (Douglas 1966) dirt is the wrong thing in the wrong place. The dirty man is then the man who is sexual in wrong ways, falling out of the heterosexual matrix. This goes also for "the old slag" who is connoted with promiscuity. Following my discussion on embracing shame it is possible to embrace the "old slag" as a feminist and anti-ageist strategy. One may however enquire if an embracing of the stereotype of the dirty old man is possible and what this might mean for challenging of heterosexist heteronormative masculine sexuality emphasising erection and penetration that pervade in old age.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIzSki7ZcTM> (2007-11-13)

<sup>9</sup> As I have noted elsewhere (Sandberg 2007), love and sexual relationships between old men and younger women has received little attention in the studies of older men and masculinities. It is however not only on a representational level that older heterosexual men are sexually desirable, Ginn & Arber (1993) note how men are considered desired dating partners at older ages than women, who earlier lose their 'attractiveness'.



### **Ageing through Queer Temporality**

The article has so far argued for how queer theory's embracing of shame may become a challenge to ageist discourses in which only the "successful" old are promoted. Seeing old bodies as abject and failed, looking at age and gender performativity in relation to failure opens up for a whole different thinking of ageing and normativity. I have also argued for how heteronormativity must be rethought, seeing sexualities of older people as on the margins of the heterosexual matrix. As I have purported throughout the article queer theory offers a radical rethinking of life and society and following Foucault queer theory implies a "resurrection of knowledges" (Foucault 1997). In this final section before concluding I will argue for how the dominant yet contradictory discourses on successful old age and old age as decline is linked to certain modes of temporality

To understand temporality and what "queer temporality" may imply it is plausible to turn to Judith Halberstam. In Halberstam's words "part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (Halberstam 2005, 2). This means in effect that queer lives who are not centred around birth, child-raising and are lived in the shadow of HIV/Aids make visible the taken for granted and the contingency of what one may perceive as normal life course and ageing. Halberstam discusses two modes of heteronormative time "time of reproduction" and "time of inheritance" (Halberstam 2005). Living along the modes of these temporalities involves following a life course linked to work, reproduction and a long and healthy life in retirement. Living along these temporalities is essential for doing "successful ageing" and becoming the desired retiree. As I have noted, heterosexuality in itself is a stipulation but not a guarantee to be comprised at the core of heteronormativity. The failures of old people to perform a desired gendered sexual and aged self go beyond the queer and include the old woman dressed in clothes inappropriate for her age, the dirty old man but also the drug addict. Not only is it enough to work and reproduce, longevity of

life is in itself important since, as Halberstam argues, we “applaud the pursuit of a long life” and pathologize those who do not wish to live long but like for example drug abusers “live in rapid bursts” (Halberstam 2005:2). Ironically an overwhelming part of the older population in the West are dependent on prescribed drugs for their every day existence, perhaps following the pathologisation of old age. This haze of drugs is however incorporated into a normative temporality of old age, whereas taking drugs as leisure is condemned. Remaining active when old is in general regarded as ageing well and successful ageing. But gerontologists schema for assessing activities among the older are often morally charged with the exclusion of activities such as gambling, drinking (Katz 2000). Morals are thus rigidly framing the lives of older, deeming what activities are appropriate, in relation to everything from sexuality to hobbies and dress. In other words: bourgeois respectability forms firm boundaries for what is intelligible and desirable temporality and consequently who can become a proper subject.

My earlier discussion on flexible bodies and who can avoid becoming a failed older person is in essence related to how one follows certain temporalities. There is in the positive discourses of “ageing well” an intersection of discourses on class, sexuality, ability and gender which makes up a normative framework for how life course and ageing is done. This affects and shapes the everyday lives and experiences of older people, how one can or cannot live one’s life.

### **Concluding remarks**

In an increasingly neo-liberal, consumerist and progressivist Western society old age is framed within two dominant discourses which are seemingly at odds with each other, old age as decline and “the positive ageing” where old age is connoted with remaining active, autonomous and responsible as well as mature. Both however stem from the same ageist and mid-life perspective where old age cannot contain any positive content (Calasanti and King 2005). Queer theory’s turn to negativity and embracing shame can be seen as a way to deconstruct these ageist discourses and theorise old age differently. Regarding old age as performative in a similar way to gender moreover opens up a discussion of the role of failure in relation to age. Not being able to



perform one's age has consequences also for one's gendered self albeit differently for men and women. Sexuality plays a central role in this and queer theory's discussions on heteronormativity and hierarchisations of sexualities could well be used also to discuss sexuality and old age. To include ageing and old age further in queer theory may in addition be a way of expanding and rethinking notions of normalcy and sexuality, where the discourse so pervasive on older people's sexuality; asexuality, needs a whole lot more attention. The discourses of positive ageing, how to become a successful retiree are based upon an understanding of ageing as a form of moral laxity, an inability to control and perform a desirable self, and moral discourse is on the whole very strong in relation to old age. These pre-given and naturalised moral codes of old age may be challenged through queer temporalities revealing the constructed nature of the life course framed by time of reproduction and time of inheritance. In conclusion a turn to queer theory may not only confront ageism but imply a resurrection of knowledges springing from the old, ugly and the queer.

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